

## HOW BILLY WENT UP IN THE WOODS.

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## CHAPTER III.

## PEER THE TAILOR.

One day it happened that the tailor had not been home for twenty-four hours. Billy's coming into his family had made Peter very negligent. When he failed to bring food for the old woman and child, he assured himself that most likely Billy would get some. Peter was sure he ought to do that much for the shelter of a comfortable home. So every week the tailor drank more and stayed away from that home longer; but Billy, wholly absorbed in his own plans, hardly noticed the fact; and Ben never complained of anything that could be endured. As long as the cow had fresh grass, they had milk, and did not suffer. If it happened that Billy heard granny ask for meat, he got it for her; if not, she went without and forgot it from one meal-time to another. Indeed, she forgot everything but her Bible.

Well, as I have just said, Peter had not been home for twenty-four hours. Sunset came, and Billy did not return. The minstrel troupe were getting ready to leave the town, and he was probably with them. The cow did not come home as she had often been accustomed to do, of her own accord.

All these non-appearances made Ben very uneasy. He laid the table with empty dishes, and then watched on the door-steps. The stars came out and winked at him; the crickets made lonesome music. Presently granny tottered across the room, took up an empty cup, and shook her head musingly. "Was the tea strong to-night, dearie?" she asked. "It seems as if it must have been poor stuff, I feel so weak."

"You have not had any, granny, but I guess we will s-s-oo—" began Ben, and then stopped. It did not seem worth while to stutter long over a thing so doubtful. But when the old clock struck eight, Ben took his torn hat from the peg behind the door and said, "I am going after Brownie; she must have got into Mr. Ellery's pasture."

"Yes, child. The green pastures and still waters," answered the old woman. "And there is the Shepherd, you know. I shall not want."

"There isn't any shepherd there, and we must go after our own cow when she stays away, granny."

Ben shut the door gently then, and went down under the sundflowers along the road and over a narrow bridge, stopping to look into the rapid stream where the cattle came to drink at noon-time. Yes, sly Brownie was in the neighbor's pasture; but she took little Ben's grave rebuke very meekly, as she reached the bridge and clattered over it, her hoofs shaking the unsteady planks.

As soon as he saw her headed in the right direction, Ben lingered to look longingly up the main road, for it was not so dark that he could not see if any one should happen to be coming down the road. He was just turning to go on, when he discovered a man in the distance. As Ben saw him walking first in the dusty road, then in the dewy may-weed of the border, now here, now there, he sped briskly toward him to act as a walking-stick. How often he had performed this sad duty before! Yet there was no hesitation or delay in the way he sprang forward to help the unhappy father, who had done so little for his child.

"Humph! I should think you had better be on hand—leaving poor fellows to find his way home all 'lone this time night."

Ben did not answer. He had all he could do to keep his small feet out from under Peter's great boots, and to keep both himself and his unhappy parent from falling to the ground. At the bridge they made more noise than even the cow had made in crossing. The old planks creaked and rattled, while Peter lurched from one side to another.

"Take care, father! See, oh, s-s-see!" stuttered Ben. "You go too near the edge!"

The shrill warning came too late. Peter staggered, pitched, and reeled over into the brown water. One hand vainly snatching at Ben, only tore the shabby straw hat off his head. The poor child gave a long, loud shriek for help. Fear loosened his stammering tongue, and the cry, "Father will

down! Come, oh, come!" rang out wildly over the fields. Meanwhile, by kneeling, he had seized the drunkard's coat, and was able to hold him at least a moment.

It seemed an hour to Ben. Peter struggled madly, and flung both arms around the frail boy to draw him recklessly down with him to death. Over he went, without resistance, and the leaping, sparkling stream that was so beautiful by day swept over them both. The stars twinkled overhead, and the crickets chirped in the crisp grass, and at that very moment Brownie was softly lowering at the little red cottage door. Granny waked up and called out in the silence, and shadow, "Bring the good book, Bemie, then we will go to rest."

Two hours later Billy came gayly whistling home, and found the cottage dark, the fire out, and the poor old woman shivering, troubled to understand the strange stillness around her and her own discomfort. He lit a candle and looked on the lounge, expecting to find little Ben curled up there asleep, but the kitten, mewling pitifully when he disturbed her, was there all alone.

"Where can he be, gran?" The words were arrested on Billy's lips. Farmer Ellery entered the room, and motioned to him to keep still. A woman who followed him led granny tenderly into the next room, while outside the door Billy heard muffled voices and many footsteps.

A moment later, how his blood seemed to freeze with horror! The door opened, and sad-faced men brought in on a plank, torn from the old bridge, Peter the tailor, dead! His pallid face gleamed through the matted hair, the water dripped from his clothing; and clutched tightly to his breast was poor little Ben. The child's soft locks streaming back, showed the sweet face that looked to Billy like an angel's, so pure was it now. The patient little helper! Billy burst into tears. He forgot the stuttering, the baby pinafore, the copper-toe shoes that used to make Ben so funny. He all at once remembered how he gave himself so lovingly to everybody's service—to his, to granny's, to the miserable father's even unto death; but it seemed as if Billy must get him back, if only to tell him how much he loved him. But that could not be ever again.

Farmer Ellery and the other kind neighbors made every effort to restore the two to consciousness; but all was of no avail. They could only keep the sad condition of things from the poor old woman until morning, and then vie with one another in bringing her comforts.

The next few days were very strange ones to Billy. He never forgot an hour of that morning when he sat on the door-step in the warm sunshine, and peeped every now and then into the cottage, where, on the old lounge, made white with snowy linen, was a child, strewn from head to foot with apple-blossoms.

"He was not great, or handsome, or very smart," thought Billy, "but he will be missed, for he was good, and he loved everybody. He was always ready and willing to help, or to do, or to suffer. He was worth twice as much as I am. Nothing is left for me but granny. I'll have to make up to her the loss of both of them."

Suddenly there came into Billy's mind the thought of his chosen occupation. Was he not to start out as a minstrel that very week?

I doubt if Billy had ever thought as much in all his life before as he did in the days that lay between the time when little Ben was brought home so cold and white, and the funeral, when the kind neighbors buried him away out of sight under the green sod. He seemed to be taking a new view of life altogether. He could not have told the reason why, but the idea of starting off with the minstrel troupe seemed to lose its fascination. He would have to leave that little green mound behind him, and he did not want to do it.

It was two days after the funeral when, as Farmer Ellery was at work in his field, there appeared quite unexpectedly a red head over the fence near him, and then a boy with a very earnest face.

"Good-day, Billy. Going to leave us, I hear?"

"No, sir. I have come to say I want to make a man of myself by being just a hard-working boy, if you will show me how. And could I work for enough to keep an old lady, do you think? I am going to keep her, anyhow. The town shan't have granny. I am sorry I refused your offer. That minstrel nonsense is no go for me."

Billy's face grew as red as his hair, but he went on in a minute.

"Her Book tells what a fellow ought to be, you know, and I think I had better get into being something worth while. If I turn short around, maybe I can!"

"Make the most of yourself, with the help of God."

"That is it exactly."

"Come over the fence. Take a hoe and begin," said Farmer Ellery.

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE REAL BEGINNING.

When Billy had worked a while in silence, the farmer stopped, and leaning on his hoe handle, said, with a kindly smile, "Let's attend service now for a little while?"

As Billy stared at him, he went on: "There is a great deal of preaching done, my boy, that is not done by parsons. The good Book says: There are many voices in the world, and none of them are without signification. I can hear some of them this morning. Can't you?"

Billy pushed his ragged hat up from his forehead and listened, his bright eyes wandering from the moist brown earth at his feet to the new dandelions scattered like fallen stars on the near pasture land, then up to the intense blue beyond the farmer's picturesque old windmill. He heard no "voices"—nothing but the twitter of birds in their honeymoon days of house-building and the faint low of cattle away by the brook, whose sight he hated of late.

"Don't you hear the Spring voices all saying: 'Now is the starting time, boy! We are young and strong.' So are you. Everything depends on the way you begin. There is only one chance to plant yourself for growth in your life-time; only one season for the proper blossoming. Billy, I want you to stay where you start this morning until you give yourself a chance to grow."

Mr. Ellery went on hoeing after that, and Billy mused on his words with a tolerably clear understanding of them. By-and-by Mr. Ellery said: "I have engaged Prissy Tarbox to come and live in the cabin; she will take care of granny for the rest and the milk. She is a good-hearted, smart woman, so the old lady will fare better than she had fared before; but you must be kind to her, all the same."

"There, now! I could have gone with Amnerly just as well as not," was the thought that flashed across the boy's mind—with the quick image of the minstrel "show"; but after that came another memory, that spoiled the fancied fun. Poor little Ben, stumbling about, wearied with his tiresome mimicry. Once and for all Billy said to himself, "Whatever I am, I won't be a fool! I'll work!"

At twelve o'clock a girl about Billy's age appeared in the farm-house door and blew a horn; it was the signal for dinner. Several hired men came toward the kitchen, stopping first to wash in a neat little room adjoining the wood shed. Billy thought the kitchen, with its spotless tables, its dresser full of bright tins and blue crockery, simply magnificent; while to have corned beef, three kinds of vegetables and a pudding, was an experience for his stomach unprecedented in the past. As the farmer saw him eat, he doubted about his ability to move the hoe again that day with any degree of liveliness, but he said to his wife, later: "We must have patience. When any fellow is apparently all stomach, that must be pacified before his conscience can wiggle or his heart beat worth a snap. I have believed in Billy, because, while half starved, he did appear to have a feeling for his old granny. Let him eat against time for a while."

Strange as it would have appeared, Billy could have eaten even more that very day; but he was a little bashful in the presence of a girl. It was his first encounter with one who wore good clothes, and lived anywhere in particular. He had borrowed and lent money and food to certain wild little news-venders and "black-headed-Jim girls" of the various cities where he had dwelt, but "Nan" Ellery, as her father called her, was a different creature. She was so sweet and bright that she made Billy think of a young colt. She had eyes that filled with fun when half the boy's knife seemed to vanish down his throat with his pudding; and while he was "mad" at her for seeing—as of course she must see—how red his hair was, he wished that his hair had happened to be as black as her own, which was braided in one long tail down her back.

Mrs. Ellery, who sat at the head of the table, was a fine-looking, pleasant woman. The men, who rolled down their sleeves and put on linen jackets before coming to the table, were sensible, good-natured fellows. But there was one other person present whom Billy thought rather an impressive individual. He was a boy about sixteen years old, with a handsome face, and he was a trifle dandyish in his stylish clothes, but very pleasant in manner. This was Stanton Ellery, a nephew and ward of the farmer's, and he also lived in the family.

For the next few days Billy was as busy taking notes of people and things, as he was industriously occupied with various new duties.

Mrs. Ellery would have overlooked his wardrobe had he had any to undergo that process; but when she found he owned only the tatters on his back, she soon had him decently clad, and gave him a brush, a comb, a Bible, and a room. What this last was to Billy she never imagined. It was only a low room, over half the kitchen, but when he knew it was to be his, he felt like a king. Over the bed, with its red and yellow calico spread, was a hanging shelf for curiosities, evidently, as there was a clamshell there and a pigeon's wing. In the cherry-wood washstand was a drawer full of twine and nails. There was a table—not so very rickety—and on it a pile of illustrated papers. That looked as if some time he might sit there and read. At the window a "turkey red" curtain let in a rosy light, and to Billy the place seemed richly furnished.

Mrs. Ellery gave him also several articles to be worn for a change, and on Sunday. These were regarded by Billy with great pride, as they hung on pegs inside the door. Yes, life had indeed begun for the boy; he was "planted," and ready to "take root."

Farmer Ellery was very prompt and active himself, and Billy, studying him, had concluded that he was "smart"; when about the end of the week, this impression was, for the time, obliterated. Billy considered himself a pretty good judge of horse flesh, and he had attended some horse sales, very well managed, as he thought. Now Mr. Ellery had a horse that was the object of Billy's secret scorn, and perhaps with reason. Bob was one day tied to the hitching-post by the back gate, and Billy was near by, mending a wheelbarrow. Meanwhile a man came along, and leaning on the gate, asked, "Where's the boss?"

"Down in the south lot."

"Do you know if he wants to sell that critter?"

"I don't believe he'd like to part with it—old Bob's a staver."

"Good for anything?"

"Good! When his grit is up he can pass any trotter on the road. He was an old pacer, Bob was; now to be sure Mr. Ellery just keeps him for steady work—he don't mind how much he does, or how little either," muttered Billy, driving a nail into the barrow furiously.

"He looks like a galvanized old hoop petticoat," grunted the stranger, poking Bob's ribbed sides.

"If he was lazier he'd be fatter," returned Billy.

"Well, I ain't looking for a beast to drive in Central Park."

"If you was you might go farther and do worse, so far as some points are concerned," said Billy, dropping the hammer, and letting himself loose, so to speak, on the inquiring stranger, who was greatly amused and a little bit moved by Billy's evident knowledge of horse talk, if not of horse flesh. He was not at all sure but that Bob was the horse for him, if a tenth of this shrewd faced boy said was true. Ellery was renowned for his honesty, and his boy could have had no instruction about selling a horse not for sale.

"Go find your father. I want another critter for farm work, and maybe this old plug will do, if he wants to get rid of him." Billy started, but at that moment Mr. Ellery himself came up a lane and advanced toward them, in response to the man's loud "Hello, friend! what'll you take for this horse?"

"What will you give?"

"That depends. What sort of an animal is it?"

"One to be relied on. He never does anything unexpected."

"What is he good for?"

"He is the best eater you ever saw."